

## Once Statehouse work complete, Topeka looks for boost in tourism

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The Capital-Journal  
Published Sunday, February 15, 2009

Following the multiyear renovation of the Utah Capitol, wedding parties packed the ballrooms on weekend nights, the number of tour participants ballooned and annual visitors swelled by 150 percent in the remodeled structure's first year.

"I would agree with anyone who says it increases tourism," Capitol architect David Hart said of the project.

Utah and a handful of other states renovating their Capitols in the past 15 years offer a glimpse of the potential economic impact Topeka could receive when Kansas' Statehouse renovation is completed.

Most of those states, though not all, have seen spikes in visitors, and some projections for the Kansas construction show an increase of 30,000 to 60,000 visitors a year.

Topeka economic development officials salivate at the Statehouse's potential million-dollar draw.

"I can't wait to market one of only 50 of its kind," said Olivia Simmons, president and executive director of Visit Topeka Inc.

The project, however, has drawn criticism because its cost has ballooned to \$285 million from an estimated \$90 million to \$120 million before work began in 2000. The renovation is expected to be completed in 2011.

### **Richmond, Va.**

Virginia's Capitol visitation has "unquestionably" been aided by its recent renovation, said Mark Greenough, the Capitol's tour supervisor.

Its visitor numbers jumped from 68,000 the two years immediately before work began to 103,000 in 2008, the first complete year it reopened.

The building was closed between 2005 and 2007 while workers built an underground extension, expanded committee rooms and added new exhibit areas.

"It's easier to come here, easier to park, easier to shop and eat on the premises," Greenough said.

### **Austin, Texas**

Counting visitors at the Texas Capitol, with its tens of entrances, is like "trying to count feral cats in a barn," said Julie Fields, spokeswoman for the Texas State Board of Preservation.

What the board does have is the number of people taking tours. In 1989 and 1990 — construction began in the middle of 1990 — the building averaged 175,000 tour-goers.

In 1995, the year it reopened, the Capitol saw 238,000 tour participants and another 192,000 in 1996. Those number hovered in the 180,000s until 2003 when building hours were cut and the numbers dropped to the 160,000s.

Fields cautioned against drawing concrete conclusions. As a former tour guide before the renovation, she said she remembers never counting tour-goers.

"I'm not sure how accurate those early counts are," she said.

## **Salt Lake City**

Utah opened the doors of its new Capitol structure on Jan. 4, 2008, and in swarmed the masses.

In years prior to construction, the building routinely pulled in around 100,000 visitors.

In 2008, more than 250,000 people walked the sparkling new halls, said Allyson Gamble, the director of visitor services at the Utah Capitol Preservation Board.

She said people are using the building more for function now as ballrooms available for high school dances and other formal occasions are booked every Friday and Saturday night until June.

Many of those visitor numbers surely come from fourth- and seventh-grade classes that tour the facility as part of their study of Utah history.

## **Des Moines, Iowa**

Iowa is finishing up its Capitol renovation, but Joan Arnett, tour guide supervisor, is skeptical about any increase in visitors.

The majority of the work is already complete, she said, and "I don't see the numbers going up."

Through the 1980s and 1990s, the Capitol averaged in the upper 60,000s of visitors. Much of that time was during exterior renovations.

Through the 2000s, while interior changes continued, the numbers were in the 50,000s, and even as those internal renovations near an end, the numbers stay steady.

"There doesn't appear to be any rhyme or reason," Arnett said.

## **Impact?**

Topeka is waiting anxiously to see whether other cities' boom plays out in Kansas' capital.

Statehouse architect Barry Greis said in conversations with other architecture firms that worked on Capitol renovations, the Statehouse visitor numbers could jump from around 60,000 the past two years to between 90,000 and 120,000 per year.

Translating those increased visitors into local economic effects isn't an exact science.

Tiffany Tauscheck, vice president of marketing at the Des Moines Convention and Visitors Bureau, said Iowa's ongoing Capitol renovation is only one of many efforts to draw in tourists.

"I'm not sure what kind of effect it will have," she said.

In Topeka, tour guide officials said 70 percent of visitors to the Statehouse come from outside of Kansas.

Simmons, with Visit Topeka Inc., said a tourist to the capital city spends an average of \$100 per day.

She said convention-goers and those who stay overnight throw down about \$150 per day.

If the conservative projection of an additional 30,000 visitors post-renovation comes true, Topeka would see a \$3 million to \$4.5 million infusion.

Whether that plays out, Topekans will have to wait and see.

It will take legislative action this session to finish the project after a committee in December declined to authorize the bonds for the final phase.

Senate President Stephen Morris, R-Hugoton, said he thinks lawmakers will act.